

BACK FENCE

Veterans
CONTINUING TO SERVE



THIS WEEK:
Lessons from history

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TRUE STORY

Memories of Vietnam Service Remain Vivid 40 Years Later

There are naval forces that receive well-deserved publicity and accolades for their dangerous and breathtaking adventures as part of their service in war and in peace.

This is the true story of a group of 65 sailors and six officers in a small wooden minesweeper that endured monsoons, typhoons, and other acts of God and fallible humans in a 10-month deployment to Vietnam during 1966-67. They never received all the publicity and accolades they earned.



CONNIE O'NEILL

In October 1965, at age 29 and a Navy lieutenant, I was honored to be assigned as the commanding officer (captain) of that little wooden ship, the *USS Prime*, homeported in Long Beach, California.

We were to deploy to Vietnam in less than a year after a total engineering overhaul and retraining period in which half of the crew and four of six officers would be replaced by raw newcomers. Those 10 months flew by like a shot, and in August 1966 we were off to win the Vietnam War not by sweeping mines but as a Band-Aid deterrent to contraband and personnel infiltration by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong into South Vietnam. Crossing the Pacific with my ship were four Minesweeper Division 72 mates having these wonderful battleship-sounding names: *Embattle*, *Firm*, *Reaper*, and *Force* — but really they were just little wooden ships, like mine.

Eleven days later the five ships arrived in Pearl Harbor. My ship had three of its four Packard diesel engines conk out during the transit. (Packard diesels conking out were a regular but ulcer-producing occurrence in minesweepers.) My ship crawled into Pearl on one engine and one propeller shaft, but we were fortunate that the normal stiff afternoon trade winds for whatever reason died down, and I had a relatively easy time of putting the ship alongside the pier. This turned out to be an omen of the way our 10-month deployment would go: imminent disaster followed by seemingly miraculous salvation — God smiling on our little wooden ships.

After engine repairs in Pearl, we followed the island-hopping path the Marines cleared for us in WWII: Midway; Kwajalein, where we experienced a tsunami, forecasted as dangerous but it turned out mild; then Guam; Subic Bay, Philippines; and finally off the coast of war-torn Vietnam and smack into the monsoon season.

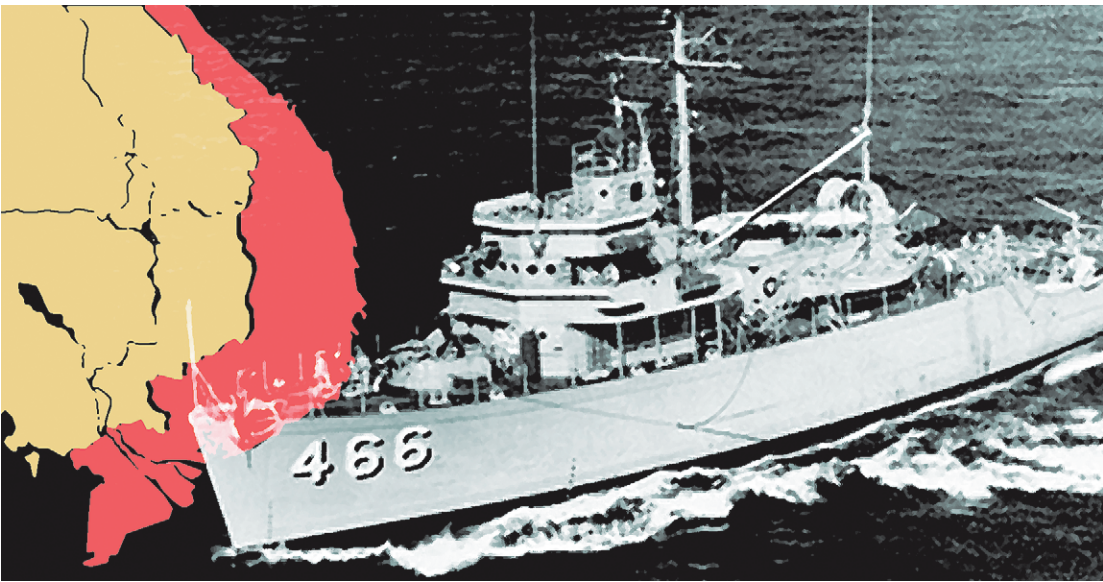
Weather as an Enemy

The monsoon season off the coast of Vietnam means weeks of constant high winds, high seas, and rainstorms punctuated with brief interludes of one or two days of calm. It reminds me of my pal Paul Galanti's description of flying — but in reverse: hours and hours of boredom, punctuated by minutes of stark terror. As it is with all at-sea operations, weather plays a significant role in every evolution and activity, especially if you are a small wooden minesweeper on the high seas.

The following near-disasters are some of the events that show how our enemy — not the Viet Cong, but the weather — almost did us in.

Navy oilers would regularly first refuel and replenish the VIPs of the Navy, the aircraft carriers, up north in Yankee Station, off the coast of North Vietnam. Then they would *unrep* (underway replenishment) to us lesser worthies strung out along the coast of South Vietnam who were trying to prevent bad guys and bad guns and ammo from sneaking into South Vietnam.

I would risk anything to maneuver alongside another ship for *unrep* in the worst weather, which it normally was during the monsoon season. Why — for fuel? No. For food? No. For water? No. For mail? Yes! And I knew my crew felt the same way. Remember, this was before e-mails. Our turnaround time from when I sent my wife a letter to when I received a reply was at best 20 days. We literally ached for mail. That is why I made the decision to go alongside a Navy oiler while both underway in monsoon high winds and heavy seas, and with two engines conked out. While alongside the oiler, for some reason it decided to increase speed. Some lines were parted and one knocked a sailor over the side into the white-capped waters between the two ships. “*Man overboard!*” — the most chilling words a captain can hear. My Iron Men did exactly as trained: threw a life ring in the water and chopped all remaining lines connecting the ships. My Iron Man in the high seas



kept his cool and swam, mostly inundated, to the life ring. (Hailing from North Dakota, his only swimming training was at Navy boot camp.)

I steered the ship in a full circle and — here's the miracle part — I realized that the accursed wind that caused all the problems was now actually helping me maneuver the ship by blowing the ship sideways to my sailor. Once alongside, a couple of the rescue detail jumped in and secured him to a hoist and reeled him in — wet and cold but safe and sound.

I visited him soon after at his bunk where the hospital corpsman was issuing him a medicinal glass of Irish whisky. (Lord, did that look good!) He was in good spirits and to this day this Iron Man is probably regaling his grandkids about his 20-minute dip in the South China Sea. God smiled on us again.

One of the many monsoon storms beating up on

us again left us with one operable engine. We made a 5-knot beeline to a U.S. junk base off Pan Thiet that I thought would provide a protected anchorage while my engineers repaired blown head gaskets, ruptured lube oil lines, etc. All the swift boats were safely snuggled in a little cove but because we were a little larger we had to anchor further out to sea. We dropped our anchor and were doing our best to ride out the storm when — *wham* — the anchor chain parted and we started to be blown onto the beach. My Iron Men on deck somehow were able to reconnect the other anchor while my Iron Men below deck were able to provide just enough power from a damaged engine to keep us from a beaching disaster. After about four hours of pounding and carefully nursing anchor chain and engine, the weather abated. We were were okay. God smiled on us again.

HEEDING CHURCHILL

When Veterans Vote, They Should Look at Records

“Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by waiting to see what happens, nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement.” Sixty years ago, Sir Winston Churchill, in his Iron Curtain speech, described the challenges of a “cold war.” For this 30-year veteran,



BILL FLANAGAN

Churchill's words ring true for the War on Terror.

It is disheartening to see the political left, both in Hollywood and in Congress, once again attempt to cause disunity in America as our brave young men and women fight the battle. Added to that mix are the national media, which consistently take every opportunity to overplay our military's missteps — common in war — and which ignore the progress that has been

made. Congressional minority party members making political points that obviously help the enemy and increase risks for troops in the field confound me. It is a reminder of my time in Vietnam when I left that party because I felt its actions increased our casualties and extended that war.

Now as in the Vietnam War, American public opinion is the most critical front in the war. While this is a tough battle, there are some positive differences between now and then. The mainstream media, exemplified by *The New York Times*, still have an anti-military bias, but this time they are not the only show in town. This time we have alternative news sources on cable — and we have the Internet. The latter gives us the views from our troops in the fight that are different from reporters' views. Despite the best efforts of the press and the minority party's anti-military coalition, looking to cut defense spending by some \$60 billion, the American public continues to hold our military in high regard.

Lack of Confidence in Media

A March Harris poll found 47 percent of the public has a great deal of confidence in the people running the military, while TV news and the press earned the

confidence of less than 20 percent of the public.

We are fortunate in Central Virginia to have a wider set of media views. The *RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH*, starting with the Editorial Pages, gives us a good selection of columnists, which ensures we don't get just *The New York Times'* view of the war. On the news side, I have been impressed with the great coverage given our Virginia troops engaged in the war. The Public Square forum on the war also provided a valuable public service.

I also see more support and a less critical approach from both political parties in Virginia. Our Democratic governor's chief of staff, Bill Leighty, is a superb example of solid support for our military. He serves on the Board of Veterans Services and has a “What can we do to help our military and veterans?” approach — not one that asks which political points can be made.

We are also fortunate to have Vince Burgess, the commissioner of Veterans Services, leading Virginia's veteran-support efforts with a consistent focus on improving support for those who have served. Our legislators in the General Assembly have done well. Looking at the other side of the aisle — the Republican side — Delegate Kirk Cox is a recognized champion for veterans and our military members, and adds great value to the Board of Veterans Services. (I serve as a legislative assistant to Cox.) Delegates Bill Janis and Scott Lingamfelter — members with extensive active-duty service — and Terri Suit, the spouse of an active-duty Navy SEAL, are commendable for taking the lead on major veterans' military legislation.

Questions for Voters

Based on hard experience, veterans view the ongoing war with open eyes and need to be involved in the political process as we move forward to the important congressional elections this November. I urge our veterans to look at the records of the incumbents and determine: Which ones have been the consistent supporters of our military and veterans? Which have been the Churchill-types and haven't closed their eyes to the challenges we face? Which were those who

The next morning a Coast Guard cutter came alongside and gave us fresh water. To this day I have a special spot in my heart for the “Coasties” for that fresh water. Our engine repairs complete, we soon resumed our patrol, sans one anchor. It's probably still there.

A Baby Girl

It was during this same patrol that a very personal event happened to me. It was a Snoopy kind of dark and stormy rainy monsoon night that we were boarding a suspicious junk. My boarding team was still on the junk when a messenger from our radio gang came up to me on the rain-soaked bridge with a rain-soaked and blurry message copy. He was excited and shouted above the howling wind, “Captain, you're a father.” He shoved the wet message in front of me. It read: “Captain O'Neill, your wife Cathy [her name is Jeanne] today gave birth to a red-haired girl named Margaret. Mother and child doing fine. Congratulations. Signed Commander Mine Force, Pacific Fleet.” I'm glad that there were lots of raindrops everywhere because nobody noticed the few that I contributed.

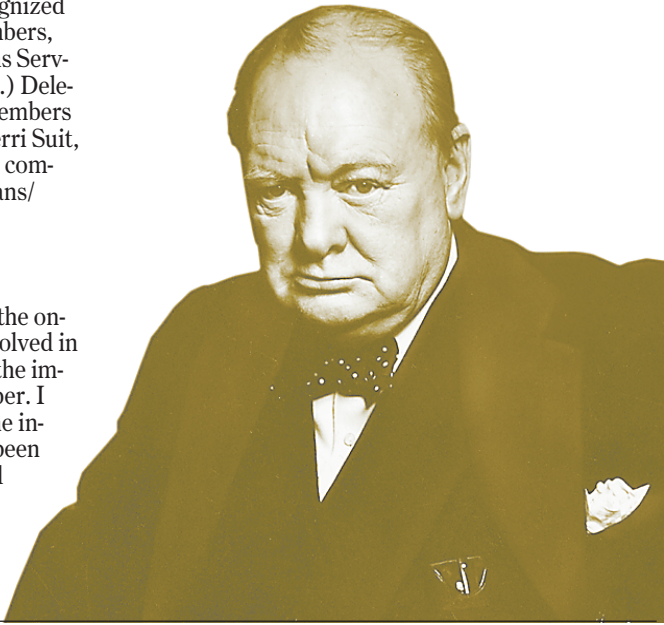
My boarding party reported that there was nothing dangerous, and only rats on board. We happily cast the junk and its cargo off and continued on our patrol. I finally first set eyes on my beautiful red-haired daughter, Peggy, at 8 months old, in Long Beach, on that glorious day when I got home.

■ *A retired captain in the U.S. Navy and a Vietnam veteran, Connie O'Neill served as the Virginia State Adjutant of the American Legion from 1988 to 2001. O'Neill chaired the Board of Veterans Affairs in the Allen administration and was appointed to the Joint Leadership Council, comprising 22 veterans organizations and 200,000 veterans, by Governor Mark Warner; in 2004 the group elected him its chairman. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

did not follow a path of appeasement in the hope that the problems and challenges would go away? Which ones supported the issues that have been advocated by our major veterans' organizations in Virginia?

If you look and find the incumbents not meeting the test, see if the challengers look better. Be informed and take part in the process. Veterans have paid the price for freedom and can continue to make a difference by supporting and electing the candidates who will meet the challenges of the War on Terror.

■ *Bill Flanagan — a retired Army colonel and a Vietnam veteran, with an Army son and USMC son-in-law engaged in the War on Terror — has served on the Virginia War Memorial Foundation's board of trustees, is the president of the state leadership of the Military Officers Association of America, and is a member of several other veterans' organizations. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.*



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